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ABSTRACT

As the IMS interoperability standards roll closer to widespread usability, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the United States Department of Labor (DOL) have formed an articulated partnership to develop a Web-based project. This interactive project places institution-neutral student services for non-traditional distance learners on the Web. With seven areas of services, users can seek out educational materials and customize a learning agenda to lead them into a chosen career path or occupational field. PBS and DOL are collaborating on a career management account to help users hold their electronic information and learning agenda in a lifelong learning portfolio. (Author/AEF)

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PBS Develops Institution-Neutral Online Services for Non-Traditional Adult Learners

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PBS develops institution-neutral online services for non-traditional adult learners.

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As the IMS interoperability standards roll closer to widespread usability, the Public Broadcasting Service and the U.S. Department of Labor has formed an articulated partnership to development a Web-based project. This interactive project places institution-neutral student services for non-traditional, distance learners on the Web. With seven areas of services, users can seek out educational materials and customize a learning agenda to lead them into a chosen career path or occupational field. PBS and DOL are collaborating on a career management account to help users hold their electronic information and learning agenda in a lifelong learning portfolio.

Introduction

With the popularity of cable and satellite dish program delivery, the general American viewing audience has many more options for receiving distance education courses. With a simple phone line, Americans can get connected to the Internet and have access to a variety of online courses. Today's educational institutions and many independent education producers are developing online courses to attract more students.

There are a number of innovators working on the Web today. Many more are following the trends of the market and the advancements of technology. Unfortunately, many are not forging ahead in new areas and sticking with the traditional methods of instruction. The largest fear going through the hearts of colleges and universities is two-fold. Faculty members fear that their administration will force distance education on them to increase enrollments and revenue, whereby the workload increases for the faculty. Secondly, the administration hesitates to advertise the costs and benefits of their distance education programs for fear that learners will choose "the cheaper alternative" instead of the better courses to receive their degree.

What is the truth about distance education? When presented with a choice, will students simply choose the less expensive alternative, regardless of quality? In search of tuition dollars, will a college administration force faculty members to offer courses at a distance? Certainly there are truths that lie within these statements. However, if you look at the impact for the students in today's environment of non-traditional family structures, it is often the parents and children who attend classes. These parents have multiple jobs and other increased pressures for the home and workplace. As their lives are become crowded, the hope of going back to school and receiving a degree becomes increasingly unlikely. With the use of technology and the Internet-based courses, the chances of working towards a degree are not only more likely, but more valuable as well.

The Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere Philosophy

The system of distance education has provided greater access to education materials to a wider audience. However, distance education still remains unattainable for many people. Three main points must be addressed by any institution that wants to offer courses and material at a distance.

1. any person may enroll in courses without regard to prior experience or education
2. open enrollment means that a student can begin and complete a course without time restrictions
3. course work and study is done anywhere the student chooses

Available to anyone?

In the current higher education system, a college or university will gladly enroll a student in a course or curriculum, but rarely assists the student in assessing the goals and capabilities of that student. Placement tests are taken and academic advisors are assigned, but do they assess experiential learning or learning styles? When a student is finishing a degree, is there assistance in transitioning to the workplace? Will a school assist a student who is less than full-time or who has attained a certain number of credits?

No doubt some schools are addressing the needs of the students with partnerships in the community and other organizations like ACT and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Unfortunately these services rarely function for the non-traditional students who do not belong to that institution full-time.

What happens when the non-traditional learners attend multiple schools? What about the adult student returning to finish a degree? Or the individual wanting some professional development instruction? How accommodating are schools to people with disabilities and special needs? Will they find a school that will offer a degree to a person who has created an educational agenda that may involve other schools?

When can I get it?

The terms "just-in-time" and "on-demand" training are well-known terms in the business world, but in the higher education realm this is not often the case. Higher education institutions often run how they have traditionally done so for centuries. With today's technology the walls of a campus could be expanded to encompass the country, if not the world. But when could you get and education?

The traditional academic terms are divided into semesters or quarters. Enrollment in classes generally begins several months prior to the term and closes when the class starts. The reason behind such a system is simple: it provides a method of counting the number of students registered, collecting the tuition dollars and fees, and assigning faculty and assistants to the course. Like the ocean tides, there is an ebb and flow to the standard academic calendar.

Altering or breaking this enrollment process is impossible for many institutions not fully supporting the "anyone, anytime, anywhere" philosophy. However, some institutions are providing "open enrollment" options to accommodate the diverse needs of the students. Open enrollment means that a student can register and begin a course at any time. The significance of this policy is obvious: when a person needs training they can register and receive it. Of course, an institution must be equipped to deal with multiple enrollment periods and the assignment of faculty to cover such courses.

Where can I find an education?

The location of educational materials was important in a traditional campus setting. For books you visit a library. For instruction you attend a lecture hall. For more extensive research you may delve into the archives of several school libraries. Even a continuing education program requires participants to belong to the local community. In an online and interactive format, there are electronic texts, discussion forums, listservs, bulletin boards, simulations, equations, research journals and a plethora of other services. Logically, no reason exists why learners without physical ties to a particular institution or community cannot utilize distance learning resources. Learners will continue to build their own communities and redefine their relationships, both personal and professional, with the technology available and the creativity of their own devices.

Why use IMS standards?

The Instructional Management System (IMS), an initiative of EDUCAUSE (originally EDUCOM), currently is developing a set of standards to identify instructional materials in a Web-based environment. Comprised of an investment board and a technical board, the IMS Project (www.imsproject.org) promotes the interoperability between institutions and the instructional materials that faculty members will increasingly use in their classrooms, whether in-person or virtually.

The impact for Project ACCESS resides in the suites and the portfolio system. With a set of approved standards, the information that resides in a portfolio could be shared between the student and organizations that the student would share his information. As part of a research project or of graduate studies, a student's work could be tagged with IMS metadata and stored online for other people to research and study.

As Project ACCESS evolves over time, the expansion of the suites and portfolio could grow to include new educational features that technology and the Internet provides. Using metadata to identify the features will increase the interoperability of products and services provided by businesses, non-profit organizations, educational institutions and a wealth of new entrepreneurial endeavors. The more interoperable products become the more resources that are available to faculty and trainers, meanwhile reducing the technical problems attached to the current crop of online educational materials.

What is PBS doing?

PBS received a FIPSE grant (Fund for the Improvement in Postsecondary Education) last year from the U.S. Department of Education to develop Project ACCESS. This project is designed as an interactive, Web-based student decision-making and advising system that gives students information about educational opportunities for completing degrees, advancing careers, and expanding horizons.

Based on an initial three years of funding, PBS Project ACCESS involves an advisory board and six pilot institutions to ensure that the development addresses the needs of the non-traditional adult learners. The development team is creating an online environment that can either guide a user through seven suites of services or allow full range to choose what services are most important. The seven suites of Project ACCESS are:

1. *Suite One: Career Goals, Credential Requirements and Learning Agenda*

   This section of Project ACCESS will lead the user through a series of self-assessment exercises to clarify his or her long-term vocational goals and aspirations. This leads to an analysis of the credentials that the user will need to move successfully along this career path. Once gaining clarity and realism about the credential requirements ahead, the user is directed through a process to construct an Individual

Development Plan (IDP) that leads to acquiring the appropriate credentials and certifications. The IDP, articulated in terms of competencies, will become a map and an evolving planning tool as the student progresses through his education.

2. *Review and Analysis of Prior Academic Attainment*

Many adult learners have pieces of academic learning, but they often do not know how these pieces fit into a degree program. Project ACCESS will enable users to assemble transcripts and records and create a personalized Career Management Account (CMA). Each CMA contains a secure and confidential Lifelong Learning Portfolio (LLP). Each portfolio will have three levels of documentation: (1) working records and self-reported information (i.e. resume); (2) semi-official documentation, including copies of transcripts and credit-relevant indicators of learning, and finally (3) verified documentation of completed courses, degrees, and certifications.

In many cases, the institutions, not the students, hold this information. Most adult students do not have a clear picture of their academic credit history or its "conversion value" into the next stage of academic degree programs. Project ACCESS would allow the user to analyze not just courses and credits, but also specific competencies and skill areas to acquire by taking credit courses that count toward a degree or certificate. This advising process will guide the user to assemble the relevant elements, understand the issues, and gain a total picture of their status in the higher education system.

3. *Credit for Experiential Learning*

This advising module will explain the various options for earning academic credit for experiential learning and enable the user to use one or several methods of gaining credit. In addition to Project ACCESS' Lifelong Learning Portfolio, this module would contain a tutorial for developing a physical portfolio in which a student may present a written case for having already learned in non-formal settings what is taught in undergraduate courses.

National examination programs such as CLEP, DANTES, and the Regents exams will also be featured in this advising space. Providers will be invited to include explanatory samples of their exams in digital form and allow the user to do a practice sample of several tests. Links will be included to appropriate Web sites throughout.

ACE/CREDIT (formerly PONSI) will also be invited to include the Project ACCESS process in their information about non-collegiate sponsored instruction. The employers who participate in ACE tend to promote education and credit-toward degrees for their employees, and thus would be likely users of the Project ACCESS advising process. In return, employers would have an opportunity to recruit successful users in the job transition section of Project ACCESS and the partnership with America's Learning eXchange.

4. *Learning Styles and Distance Education*

So a learner can gain a total picture of him or herself as a learner, this module of ACCESS will guide the user through an inventory of questions that reveal his or her strengths and weaknesses as a learner. This inventory may include the Learning Style Inventory administered by the TRG Hay/McBer Training Resources Group. The Myers Briggs will be another resource. Use of these inventories is supported by David Kolb's research on learning style types among adults and these inventories are commonly used by CAEL in their regional training workshops. Sample portions of these proprietary instruments may be free to the ACCESS user, but full use of the instruments could be taken online for a fee.

5. *An In-Person Advising Option*

Although Project ACCESS offers many free, interactive routines designed into the software, the process is self-paced and can be done in any order depending on the preferences of the user. Many cues, help items and instructional tips will be programmed to assist the users throughout. However, we understand that many people may wish to interact with a live, qualified advisor at some point in the process.

Interaction with a real person advisor is likely to be more effective after a prospective student has gone through a methodical document assembly and self-discovery process afforded by the ACCESS software. Thus once a user has begun to assemble the CMA he can opt, for a fee, interact with a trained advisor via email, telephone, Web-based threaded discussion, and possibly through See-U-See-Me technology for face-to-face contact if available to the user. Project ACCESS has invited the American College Advisory Service (ACAS) to collaborate in developing this feature of the service. Dr. Jacqueline Johnson will serve as the principle liaison for this purpose. This 7X24 service will be ready for use under pilot basis in the third year of the project.

6. *Selecting and Enrolling in a Distance Learning Program*

The user of Project ACCESS will be able to move freely throughout the four general advising areas through SERF's intuitive and attractive graphic interface. Having become both more self-aware and familiar with the rules of credit in American higher education, the user will have clear criteria to evaluate academic programs for further study. This suite will contain search procedures and tactics to find programs and evaluate their appropriateness.

Project ACCESS will invite distance learning programs to apply to be listed and described in the software along standard criteria. A panel of experts in the field of distance education selected by the Advisory Group will review these applications in the second year of the grant to determine which programs meet a basic set of criteria. Institutions listed directly in Project ACCESS would pay an annual subscription fee to PBS, which will use the funds to maintain and update the service. In addition, hot links will be provided to other Web sites and search services outside ACCESS that relate to distance education.

Users of Project ACCESS will have clear ideas of what they want in a program and how to assess if a program has those features. Project ACCESS will also link where appropriate, to on-line admissions and registration at participating colleges. The user can draw upon any information in his or her Lifelong Learning Portfolio to transfer to the institution as part of the application process.

Although the main target population for ACCESS will be adults in the United States, we are aware that distance education by definition is international. We anticipate a growing number of non-Americans based overseas being interested to access distance learning options in the United States. This exploration will only begin in the third year of the grant period.

7. *Continuous Advising, Evaluation, and Transitions to the Workplace*

Designed to serve the student throughout an educational program and beyond, this suite assumes the major work of the decision-making support service will be completed. The client will have the option to contact a Project ACCESS in-person advisor at any time after the first use. Users will be asked to provide on-going evaluation of the Project ACCESS advising service itself, whether immediately after choice, or later into the program. Project ACCESS will contain a time management planner for distance learners that may be useful during the program. Another option will allow a student to project a final GPA based on different assumptions of grade performance in one's coursework.

Users of Project ACCESS will retain access to their CMA and can update them as they progress. In a sense, the final sector of Project ACCESS will return to the beginning where the user defined career goals and credential needs. Project ACCESS will not have a systematic job search and preparation unit. However in an agreement with the Department of Labor's America's Career Kit (ACK), the career information within Project ACCESS will directly reflect the occupational codes, skills taxonomy and employment opportunities using the ACK coding. Thus Project ACCESS will contain a job search capability with links to America's Career Infonet (www.acinet.org), America's Learning Exchange (www.alx.org), Job Bank (www.ajb.org) and Talent Bank (http://atb.mesc.state.mi.us/), and the PBS Ready to Earn® site (www.pbs.org/als/rte).

Why is PBS doing this?

Many institutions currently offering distance education programs assume that students are local/regional constituents who will access pertinent institutional information and student services through the conventional campus-based systems. Similarly, many institutions have established state and regional articulation agreements and transfer policies. In brief, student information and services are still primarily institution-centered and geography-based.

However, as the geographic, political, and service area boundaries once characteristic of higher education expand and become increasingly less relevant, colleges face a challenge to providing student information and services through methods that are time- and place-independent and transcend geographic, political, and service area boundaries. This challenge, which surfaced in the national PBS Going the Distance initiative, was also identified in "The Virtual University: A Report from a Joint Educom/IBM Roundtable" (Twigg & Oblinger, 1996):

> The increasing power of the consumer in addition to technology's ability to transcend space, time, and political boundaries is causing a shift in the decision-making process away from public policy and toward market-driven mechanisms. Content and mode of delivery are increasingly defined by external groups: students as well as employers. Communications technologies will contribute to both the increase in the number of providers and the choices for consumers, resulting in a more open higher education marketplace (13). ...(and) New developments in technologies and the explosive growth of networks will continue to erode the geographic hegemony of higher education. Students will be likely to select educational institutions based more on offerings, convenience, and price than on geography. This competition will not be limited to the United States or North America; it will be global (6).

Coordinating with other initiatives

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Once PBS had received the FIPSE grant, the development team met up with the staff of the America's Learning eXchange from the U.S. Department of Labor. It was discovered that this ALX project was placing an interactive tool on the Web so that a user could place resumes online and search over one million jobs posted from across the United States. Along side the job search, assessment tools and "virtual counseling" options would be available to better identify a person's potential career paths and employability in different occupations.

With the rollout of the larger DOL project, the America's Career Kit (ACK), Project ACCESS will integrate its underlying database structure with the occupational codes of ACK and offer distance education and training opportunities for people either entering the workforce, looking to change careers or simply enhancing their current strengths. Furthermore, as traditional students begin college, they can be looking for similar educational experiences through Project ACCESS and increase their employability in the national job market. As the Web becomes more populated with employers posting job descriptions and employees posting resumes, the need emerged to have a single source of federally and state standards that everyone can refer to and understand.

Project ACCESS recognizes that there are existing initiatives such as the Education Network of Maine (ENM) and new organizations such as the Western Governors University (WGU) and the SREB Electronic Common Market. These and others are emerging as brokers for consumers, helping consumers understand the choices; however, these initiatives still reflect political boundaries or regional boundaries and exist as organizational entities with a central administration. At times, these existing models tend to still be territorial and somewhat regionally competitive, or exclusive. Project ACCESS, on the other hand, proposes an open and participatory system with aspirations of being national in scope and possibly global in its ultimate reach.

Project ACCESS will also build upon the FIPSE-funded ABELINC Project lead by Governors State University and 15 community colleges around the nation. Five of these colleges will join with GSU in providing the institutional settings for both Alpha and Beta tests, and for guiding Project ACCESS from the perspectives of in-the-trenches advising professionals who specialize in helping distance learners. ABELINC is a national 2+2 articulation program for distance learners who are successful at the Associates level and wish to proceed to the bachelor's degree using these study skills. GSU and its community college partners, many of whom are leaders in the national GTD network, have worked closely with PBS on distance learning initiatives over many years. The need for an online advising service such as ACCESS, and the basic idea for PBS to facilitate and host it, emerged from the collaboration among practitioners in the GTD and ABELINC projects.

Mary's Story: A case study of a non-traditional adult learner

PBS Project ACCESS would address these information gaps and help students fulfill their educational goals. The need for the proposed ACCESS project can be conveyed best through a scenario about the typical distance learner and the dilemma of choice in a market-driven, information-rich learning society.

> Mary is about to complete her A.A. degree, at a community college that participates in the PBS Going the Distance degree project. She has completed the majority of her coursework through telecourses and the efficient use of distance learning and other instructional technologies. Long ago she invested in a VCR to have greater flexibility in recording off-air programs to view her telecourses. Within the last year, she invested in a multimedia PC and connected to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) to take advantage of telecommuting opportunities at work, as well as telelearning through online courses offered by the community college.
>
> Mary is now considering continuing her studies -- if she can find a 4-year institution that offers an upper division curriculum that will allow her to remain in her community, retain her current job, and complete the remaining two years of traditional coursework in a 3 year period. Unfortunately, of the two 4-year institutions near to Mary's home, one does not offer distance learning programs, and the other has a program that relies on two-way interactive classroom that would require regular commuting to a regional teleclassroom. At these colleges, Mary would be able to take two courses per term and would need to enroll for 5.5 years.
>
> Mary meets with her current advisor, who is knowledgeable about traditional articulation and transfer programs, but who knows little about distance learning options and non-traditional transfer/articulation programs. However, the advisor does mention to Mary that he had read about the Western Governors University and about colleges and universities that were launching virtual campuses, but he has few details to offer Mary.
>
> At this point, she is prepared to explore out-of-state institutions but is not prepared investigate each institution, not even with the assistance of the Peterson's Guide (print or Web-based). This guide raises Mary's awareness of the many institutions that offer nontraditional programs, but at the same time, overwhelms her with information. Clearly, Mary needs help in making an informed choice that will guarantee a match between her needs and the best institution.
>
> Mary, who wants her degree plans to support her career aspirations, decides to speak with Sally, the human resource and training director at her company. Sally has been involved with an innovative company/union alliance that has been exploring new Web-based resources to deliver educational programs and services to the workplace. This company/union alliance involves the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and various

innovative colleges and service providers who are willing to redefine learning environments and explore new relationships.

Project ACCESS: A Suite of Decision-Making Services

Sally and Mary jointly log-on to the Project ACCESS interactive Web site and discover that they can enter information about Mary in a personalized Project ACCESS Career Management Account. Like any study/client who logs onto the ACCESS Web site, Mary uses her Individual Development Plan to plan out her educational and career goals. Her Lifelong Learning Portfolio can then provide educational institutions and potential employers with a wide range of information about herself, her academic preferences and experiences, and her educational needs and goals. For example, Mary discovers that she can explore experiential learning by identifying possible areas of competencies that she can pursue for credit via CLEP, Challenge Examination, and/or through a portfolio development process. Mary also may record in her Lifelong Learning Portfolio her preferences on a variety of topics, such as learning style and course deliver preferences. To help with this self-discovery process, Mary may even take the Myers-Briggs and other assessments online. Because Mary wants to transfer to an upper-division institution, she enters information in her IDP about the competencies that she wants to develop and the curriculum she wants to pursue.

Sally explains that this information in the Career Management Account can be accessed and interpreted by participating colleges, universities, and non-collegiate service providers. The privacy rights of individuals are respected and protected and Mary controls the levels of interactive relationships.

A Match between Mary and the Right College

Mary is able to use her IDP to match her expectations and preferences against the programs and services of the colleges that are participating in Project ACCESS. She can find out which of these colleges and universities can meet her curriculum interests, her career aspirations, and her delivery mode preferences. As a result of the interactive session, Mary is matched-up with four institutions that offer both distance degree programs in her major and the learner support services she will need.

Once Mary is matched up with the appropriate institutions, her CMA can provide her with unofficial and "tentative" transcript evaluations, so Mary knows what coursework or requirements she will need to complete at each institution. Given more time to assimilate the information, Mary plans to interact person-to-person with designated college personnel at the four institutions by using a variety of asynchronous communications tools available through Project ACCESS.

As a result of the self-discovery process offered via the ACCESS project's "suite of student-decision making services," Mary has identified new strategies to reach her educational and career goals. She is now equipped with new tools and resources that allow her to make better, more informed choices about her future. Mary's Career Management Account, Lifelong Learning Portfolio, and Individual Development Plan are a permanent and portable resource for her to enrich and use at her discretion, anytime and anyplace.

In Summary

PBS recognizes that a powerful factor for the quality of any product resides with the consumer. For Project ACCESS, it is the students who will require the high-quality distance learning products. The sophistication of these products and the ease in acquiring them will be the telltale sign of a successful system. Project ACCESS will make every attempt to provide the non-traditional adult learners, the consumers, with as much information in which to make a decision.

The smart consumers, freed from geographic and societal constraints, will have more to choose from and will insist on receiving the highest value possible for the money spent on their education. By linking education and training opportunities with career and occupational insights will increase the matriculation of a wider diversity of learners into educational programs that will lead them down a meaningful career path. PBS Project ACCESS will become a portal to distance education and provide student services in an interactive, Web-based format.

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For additional information about Project ACCESS, please contact Chris Reese, Project Coordinator, at creese@pbs.org